

# Ceramophile

Alfred Ceramic Art Museum



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Cover – Linda Sikora and Matt Metz,  
Downdraft Kiln, Alfred Station, NY  
*Kilns of Alfred: Transactions with Fire*  
February 21 – July 28, 2019

Facing page – Robert Turner, Downdraft Kiln,  
interior view detail, Alfred Station, NY  
*Kilns of Alfred: Transactions with Fire*  
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Above – Banquet ware for the G20 2016  
(Group of Twenty), an international forum for  
the governments and central bank governors  
of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China,  
the European Union, France, Germany, India,  
Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi  
Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the  
United Kingdom and the United States.

Hosted by the First Lady of China, Peng Liyuan,  
Hangzhou, China

*Reclaiming Splendor: Ceramic Design by  
Chunmao Huang*  
Featuring the First Lady of China's Banquet Ware  
September 20 – December 30, 2018

Photos by Brian Oglesbee

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# Director's Remarks

The Alfred Ceramic Art Museum closed out 2018 with the extraordinary exhibition *Reclaiming Splendor: Ceramic Design by Chunmao Huang* –featuring the First Lady of China's Banquet Ware.

Chunmao's career took him from the countryside of Southern China to the famous porcelain city of Jingdezhen and from there to the rural landscape of upstate New York in 2000 where at Alfred University he immersed himself in American culture and the rigors of contemporary art. He received his MFA from Alfred University in 2003. In 2004 he returned to China to teach at China's number one art school, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. There he facilitated the establishment of a program in Ceramic Design for Industry in association with Alfred University's Division of Ceramic Art.

In 2014 he became recognized as a major artist-designer with his designs for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), summit banquet hosted in Beijing by China's president Xi Jinping. Twenty-one heads of state including Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and the prime minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe, sat down to dinner served on tableware designed by Chunmao Huang. Since then Chunmao has been the designer of choice for the President and First Lady of China. He designed the First Lady of China's banquet for the 2016, G20 Summit held in Hongzhou, China and the President's banquet for the BRICS summit held in Xiamen, China, 2017. Today, Chunmao Huang is the number one ceramic designer in China.

*Reclaiming Splendor* presented a timely insight to the rise of China on the world stage and a remarkable statement as to the importance of ceramic design historically and in the present, as part of a globalized statecraft.



Chunmao Huang and Wayne Higby together again in Alfred.



*Reclaiming Splendor* brought many visitors to the Museum, as many as eighteen hundred in the first few weeks. The morning after the exhibition debut, on September 21, the *China Daily*, China's English language newspaper, ran a story about the opening. China Global television spent three days in Alfred at the Museum taping the opening, Chunmao's talk on his work, his gallery talk with students of the Art History Club and interviews with Chunmao and myself, eventually resulting in a video, which was posted on all the international channels of the China Global network.

Which brings us to 2019 and the opening on February 21 of the exhibition, *Kilns of Alfred: Transactions with Fire*. Read about this show in this *Ceramophile* under current exhibitions.

#### Most exciting news:

Recently, the Museum was able to make first-hand contact with important curators in Colombia, South America. As the Director and Chief Curator of the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, I was privileged to join a trip to Medellín and Bogotá organized by Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, a 2nd year graduate student in the ceramic art program. Our group of travelers included my colleague Linda Sikora and the 2nd year graduate class.

With Andrés' help, Linda and I met with Nydia Gutiérrez, Chief Curator, Museum of Antioquia, Medellín, Emiliano Valdéz, Chief Curator, Museum of Modern Art of Medellín and Hernan Alberto Pimienta Britical, Archeological Collection Curator, University Museum, University of Antioquia, Medellín. These scholars gave us a serious amount of their time. They were wonderfully enthusiastic about our visit and the exchange of



Colombia group plants a coffee tree named "Alfred" on Medellín coffee plantation, January 4, 2019.

conversation with the grads who each delivered a presentation on their work at the Museum of Modern Art –standing room only.

ACAM will now be reaching out in concert with the art school to bring these curators to campus and develop a relationship with Latin American art. We are on a threshold of very interesting future collaborations.

Andrés has established an art and ceramic art work center in a beautiful restored 1852 hacienda situated on the Andes hillside overlooking Medellín. Look up Campos de Gutiérrez at the camposdegutierrez.org website.

It is a *Ceramophile* tradition to reflect a moment and honor those who have passed, but will forever remain important to our lives in ceramic art. The Alfred Ceramic Art Museum celebrates the major contributions to 20th century ceramic art of two masters of the medium, Warren MacKenzie and John Mason. Their individual contributions charted an innovative path of making and thinking for the present and the future. Also, the Museum recognizes an artist

close to home, Wallace "Wally" Higgins, a Tuskegee Airman during WWII honored with two Congressional gold medals for valor. Wally taught ceramic materials classes and mold making-design for the School of Art and Design at Alfred University from 1961 until his retirement as a Professor Emeritus in 1985.

"Caring for art is also caring for memories." I wrote that in the 2018 *Ceramophile*. Museums keep memories alive and often reframe them. The passage of time – a millennium or a year - puts art into perspective and new readings give pause to wonder, reconsider and expand understanding. Ceramic objects hold history in their embrace and the present moment comes alive in tangible form while witnessing new work in the context of history. I invite you to visit the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum and spend some time contemplating the ageless poetry of ceramic art.

**Wayne Higby**  
**The Wayne Higby**  
**Director and Chief Curator**  
**Alfred Ceramic Art Museum**  
**Alfred University**



# Backstory



*An assortment of earthenware shards consisting of handles, body fragments, and vessel rims.  
Photo by author.*



# It's Just a Little Bit Further

By Gregory Lastrapes

*The following article written by Greg Lastrapes is an account of Alfred University students attending a class held in the jungle area of Santa Elena a short distance from Medellín, Colombia, South America on January 6, 2019. The class was led by experimental archeologist Santiago Isaza. It is important to understand that the class visited a site that was officially excavated and abandoned and that all the shards found by the students remained at the site upon conclusion of the class. Both Santiago and the Museum clearly and strongly discourage the removal of archaeological material from sites so as to allow future research and conservation efforts. Additionally, it was understood that US law allows prosecution for the crime of exporting or attempting to export "culturally significant materials" from Colombia to the US.*

"Today will be about history." Those words began the fifth day of Alfred University's experimental research initiative Colombia as a Gateway to Ceramic Art of the Americas. As the only art historian in a group of fourteen, I knew this day was for me. As it happens, it was Three Kings Day, which meant that thousands of people would crowd the center of Medellín, making it virtually impossible to move our cohort of ceramists between destinations downtown. We decided to journey up into the mountains to visit Santiago Isaza, a self-described archeologist, anthropologist, and potter.

Sometime later, after a tumultuous bus ride up the hills in the outskirts of Medellín to a small town called Santa Elena, we ended up in Santiago's home and studio. Santiago has a background in archaeology and history but his home is covered in ancient looking pots made by his hand. Santiago's introduction to "experimental archaeology" began with a professor at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, Jorge Prieto. Prieto's goal was to research ancestral ceramics by resurrecting historical techniques, thereby gaining important cultural and material perspectives only accessible through making. His background is a complex mix of experiential learning while living amongst indigenous tribes throughout Colombia and scientific knowledge acquired while studying and teaching at the University. Prieto has since retired from public life after journeying to work with the Nasa people, assisting them in efforts to reconstruct their ancestral ceramics practices. Santiago is now one of five members of a collective comprised of Prieto's former students who are committed to faithfully reengineering ancient methods of pottery production.

My colleagues and I crowded into Santiago's living room between his kitchen and studio, wherein he began to recount the vast ceramic history of the area. Every so often, when referring to a site or discovery, he seemed to point just outside his home, suggesting the close proximity of history. As the trip organizer and translator, Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, was relaying the story of the role of ceramics in early Colombian currency, Santiago abruptly walked to the back of the room and began digging through a box full of plastic bags. He returned with a weighted bag opaque with dust and age. Without a word, Santiago spilled its contents onto the coffee table: an assortment of ceramic shards.

The pieces were fairly small. The largest was about the size of a slice of bread. An assortment of pieces in colors raging from rich brown to rusty red  
*continued*



to muted gray arranged themselves into a mosaic on the table. Delicately incised lines of all kinds danced across the surface of the shards, extrapolating into forms of all shapes and sizes. Some of the shards were two thousand years old, likely made by the Quimbaya culture which inhabited the south of Colombia and the northernmost areas of Ecuador along the coast.

Santiago soon casually recounted that he had found many of these precious objects just down the road in Santa Elena, about thirty minutes on foot. In a familiar moment of silent but unanimous consensus, we decided to see the site for ourselves. Walking down the road in Santa Elena was a curious blend of the old and new. To one side were several dense layers of soil strata, revealed by the carving out of the road. To the other, cramped buses of churchgoers and cars, full of families heading off to enjoy their long weekend, whizzed by at breakneck speed. Santiago casually exhumed several shards from the cliff face along the way, passing them down the line. Large sections of white quartz and alumina deposits bisected the otherwise ochre colored soil, revealing the volcanic history of the area.

We eventually arrived at a public park in front of a large white church, which we were told was likely the oldest in Santa Elena, having been built to accompany a colonial community evidenced by remains of agricultural plots, gold mining locations, and residential structures. The entire area was a mixture of colonial and pre-Columbian history, layered and intertwined. Behind the church, a path just wide enough for one person was worn into the floor of the jungle. With Santiago in front, we filed into the brush and set off to find the shard pile.

The trek that followed was a slow descent into a river valley, the path crisscrossed by smaller trails into the dense brush. We passed several washed out embankments, which seemed to be a result of torrential rains. However, Santiago told us that the colonial settlers often diverted the streams to dig for gold, carving large swaths out of the land. The hike seemed to stretch on for ages and several times we contemplated going back as the brush became thicker. An occasional interlude

came from Santiago, his face alight with excitement, "Just a little further!" Several more ditches and obstructing plants later, "It's just ahead!" Eventually we arrived at the bottom of the river basin, at which point Santiago veered off the sparse trail into the thick brush and began climbing up the opposite hill. I followed behind him for just a brief moment until I heard shouts from behind. We were bailing out. Santiago pressed ahead another few feet, with me on his heels. An emphatic point at the ground from Santiago shattered my thoughts of accepting defeat and returning to the group. "Look!" he said, with an elated grin.

I lifted my shoe to discover a deposit of earthenware shards protruding from the mossy ground, stacked tightly atop one another much like dry clay slaking down into water. The ceramic pieces were so dense they seemed to form their own layer of earth underneath the loosely packed leaf litter, which obscured the topsoil. Next came an uncontrollable, "Wow!" as the rest of our group filed up the hill's steep slope.

The exposed shards lay at the bottom of a narrow path with the pottery mound on one side and a sharp drop to the colonial gold mines on the other. Just up the hill was an exposed area of tilled earth the consistency of dry beach sand. Sprinkled throughout the soil were large pottery shards. The first thing Santiago handed me was a fragment to a vessel that would have been approximately two feet in diameter. The others in the group soon arrived and what was essentially a game of show and tell ensued. Shard after shard was exhumed from the ground: jar lips, textured body fragments, pieces incised with parallel lines, sculpted handles were pulled and passed around in quick succession.

Eventually Santiago stood up and raised a singular jar lip fragment with one hand and began to speak. Before Andrés had the chance to translate, his point was clear. The lip of the shard showed evidence of its production, having been coiled and pinched. Santiago traced the undulating surface methodically with his own fingers, replicating the action of its maker some two thousand years earlier.





*Santiago Isaza observing earthenware shards recovered from a site in Santa Elena, Antioquia, Colombia. Photo by author.*

That moment solidified the significance of our expedition for me. These pots, like so many historical objects, are imbued with the identity of their makers. The material qualities of ceramic allow us to converse with ancient peoples. As Wayne Higby later put it, "I feel as though this potter's hand is reaching out and touching mine." Such is the significance of ceramics and pottery. The aged and ageless elements of clay constitute one of the most essential and continuous conversations throughout human history.

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**Santiago Isaza**, 35, is an experimental archaeologist working just outside of Medellín, Colombia. He was first introduced to clay through his professor at the University of Antioquia, Jorge Prieto. After studying clay as a means of understanding ancestral cultures, Isaza dropped out of school to pursue making, object conservation, and educating others full-time.

Ceramics in Colombia has not yet been incorporated into mainstream academic institutions as a major area of study. Additionally, ceramics is broadly conceived as an industrial or archaeologically inspired practice. As such, Isaza was compelled to leave school so as to study ceramics in depth. Santiago's current work involves faithfully recreating ancestral ceramic production techniques and educating the public through working with clay.

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